



To have and to hold? Relationships to last a lifetime

The challenge

Our relationships sustain us – grounding our identity and offering us practical and emotional support through good and bad times. As we live longer lives, we'll likely need a range of changing relationships over time, but there's not enough support available for building or sustaining these. Those who don't conform to the "mum, dad and 2.4 children" mould are too often left out in the cold.

What we know

Our family relationships are critical to our wellbeing, but our family structures are changing as attitudes and aspirations change and as we live longer lives:

- Longevity means that four or even five-generation families will become increasingly commonplace.
- Family structures are changing – with more blended families following divorce or separation. The latest ILC analysis shows between 2001 and 2021, the proportion of married people under 50 fell by 22% and the proportion of people over 50 who were divorced or separated increased by 54%.
- ONS data suggests that the average age of parents has been steadily increasing, standing at 30.7 years for mothers and 33.7 years for fathers in 2020 (compared to 26.4 and 29.5 years in 1975).
- More people are ageing without children – with the number of people aged over 65 without adult children set to rise from 1.2 million to 2 million by 2030
- There are more people living in open LGBTQ+ relationships, forming family structures around them.

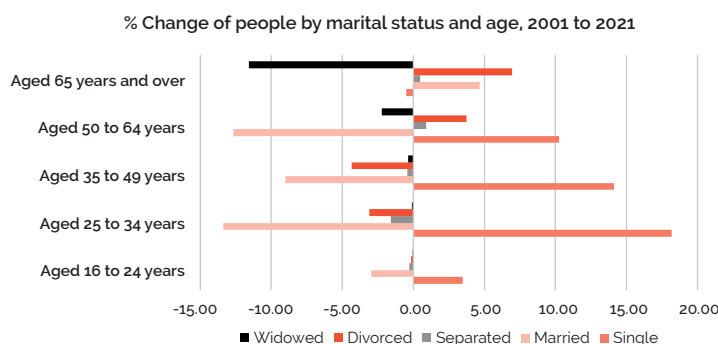
The previous life course narrative of "born, learn, work, marry, raise children, retire and die" is increasingly at odds with what is happening. We form, end, and reform relationships in more fluid ways now – but our societal structures are based on an outdated model exemplified by:

- A care system that assumes that people will be able to access care from spouses or adult children, despite more people living alone and/or ageing without children
- A pension system that penalises those who divorce
- A lack of legal clarity for those who form lasting relationships outside the traditional family/partnership norms.
- A lack of access to relationship support, particularly for those on lower-incomes.

Our failure to properly account for changing relationship norms means that there are gaps in support. For example, work by Age UK in 2019 illustrated the stigma around sexual intimacy in older adults. While the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases had increased amongst older people there were significant inequalities in sexual health between older and younger men, and between older men and older women.

New evidence

A multi-generational shift away from 'marriage for life'



Office for National Statistics, Census 2021 and Census 2001, data for England accessed through Nomis

In England between 2001 and 2021:



Almost six times more same-sex couples were living together



The number of adult children living at home rose by 29%

We know we can do better than this. Do you have a sustainable solution for longer lives?

Please email your solution to info@ilcuk.org.uk